

It's about 9pm, around race mile 525, fifteen miles from my next bike hand-off to Cort. It's dark in this *arroyo* southwest of San Felipe, save for the 10,000-lumen race light dancing across cactus as I ride sandy, rocky whoops. The partying crowds of Morelia Junction road are behind me, and this section of the wash heading south is quiet and desolate—although I did see one listless spectator standing silently next to a tent and a campfire about five miles back. I'm feeling good, keeping a respectable pace, my mind is clear, I'm relaxed and strong. The roar of the bike and bouncing light, juxtaposed against the quiet desert landscape, oddly make me want to stop and soak it all in (despite my inner urge to get to the next pits faster—we are in a race, after all).

Through a wide sandy section, I recognize some rocks and cactus. I know this spot. The last time I was here, about 365 days ago, I was resting under a cactus in the middle of the night and contemplating the fate of a *DNF*, while trophy trucks blasted past me under wide open throttle. In one year, I managed to rebuild the same blown-up CRF450X motor, refresh everything on the race bike, organize a new race effort, and return to race the Baja 1000 as a rookie *rider of record*. It was a massive amount of work and stress that culminated in a fifteen-day stint in Ensenada and San Felipe, full of hundreds of miles of course pre-running, SCORE registration, race bike prep, chase team logistics, tacos, sleeping on beaches, and memorable antics with a great group of friends. As I pass the site of 2019's fatal breakdown that led to a crushing *DNF*, I smile big, and see if I can hit it a little harder.

It started with a forum post.

"A long-time goal of mine is to build a team and race in the Baja 1000. I'm hoping to find a motorcycle team heading to Baja in 2019 that I can join (the SF250, Baja 500 or 1000) as a member of the support crew. I figure joining a crew would be a great way to get a lay of the land down there, understand the race and logistics and the process, and just learn from those that know. I'd prefer to join a motorcycle team, but any team would really do for the first time down there."

I've always been a DIY type, a self-starter who would prefer to just figure things out rather than wait for the answers—I blame my dad for that, that's always been his style. Baja was a different undertaking, though. It was too far away, too daunting, too large and legendary to just go throw myself into the fray without knowing at least a little bit about it. Maybe if I lived in San Diego or the Southwest, I could have just skipped across the border to spectate a few races and shoot the shit with some teams. But residing in Portland OR means there are 1,100 miles of pavement slab just to get to the legendary Mexican peninsula.

Mike Frick is an experienced Baja racer, having six SCORE motorcycle class finishes under his belt, including an Ironman motorcycle finish in the 2011 Baja 1000. He was kind enough to respond to my forum post and invited me to get a burger with him in Seattle, near Snohomish where he's lived his whole life. We ended up talking for hours about Baja, *Dust to Glory*, dirtbikes, and race dreams. That was August 2019. By September that year, I was on his chase/support team; shortly thereafter in October, he asked me to join his race team as one of

five riders, after his team had a last-minute re-organization (which I later learned is very common when organizing a big race effort like the Baja 1000). By November, I was in an AWD Chevy Express van with three of my close friends: Colton (driver), Dave (photographer), and Kirk (mechanic). We headed south to San Felipe with my Husaberg FE570, so I could take two legs of the 2019 Baja 1000: race start to race mile 40, and race mile 455 to race mile 580.

That race was eye opening. My chase crew and I made some incredible memories.

- Sleeping on the beach on the Sea of Cortez, living off tacos and tequila.
- My pre-runner breaking down (clogged fuel filter) in the middle of nowhere, only to be saved by a pre-running trophy truck team that carried my Husaberg out on the back of their pre-runner, dead-deer style.
- Endless miles of brutal San Felipe whoops that tested mental, physical, and psychological fitness.
- The wakeup call reality of the harsh and inhospitable Mexican desert, lack of cell service, and generally scary and exhausting riding conditions that Baja offers.
- Starting the race at 3am, just 5 bikes behind SLR Honda 1X.

And of course, the DNF. I could write an entire 3,000-word piece on what it's like to break down in the middle of the world's toughest off-road race, in the middle of the night in a sandy wash, with no road access and nothing to do but wait for your support team to find you.

But despite the failure to finish, the 2019 Baja 1000 only made me hungry for more. I returned from Mexico in the end of November, picked up the broken race bike that I co-owned with Mike and another teammate, and pulled the motor out around Christmas to begin the forensics. By mid-summer, the motor had a full top-to-bottom rebuild, with a new crank and bearings, CRF450R head and cam, and KPMI stainless valves. The chassis had fresh suspension work from AHM Factory Services. I began flogging it in the central Oregon desert to test reliability and suspension settings—all while making spreadsheets, building a team calendar, looking at race mileage maps, booking accommodations, and recruiting a capable 3rd rider to split race costs and mileage with me and Mike.

Around 9:15pm, I pull into the Baja Pits at race mile 535. A crew member runs over to me with a dump can on his shoulder and drops it into the gas tank dry break, while another pit crew member begins scrubbing my race light lens. Over the idling thumper exhaust note, the guy wiping my lights shouts, *"¡Los trophy trucks estan unas tres millas atras!"* I hold up three fingers and yell back "Three miles?" "Yeah" he says in accented English "there's one leader, and then two more a mile behind him!" I throw up a thumbs up, and pin it out of the pits, knowing I have about five miles until the safe haven of my chase team's rider handoff. It's five miles of typical San Felipe whoops, and I've been on the bike for a hundred miles now, but somehow, I ride with perfect rhythm and focus, doing everything I can to not get passed by the trophy truck pack on the racecourse. I see Colton's black van with big, white 324X numbers on the side, lock up the rear, and skid into our pit. Cort is geared up and clearly fired up for his section. I tell him

that the trophy trucks are minutes behind me, that he should wait and get passed in the safety of the pits; he declines and jumps on the bike and heads into Matomi Wash. Moments later, two McMillin trucks and Alan Ampudia come through the rows of pitting teams, motors roaring and transmissions whining, a 1,000-horsepower battle between the biggest names in desert racing, competing for the glory of overall win. I stand, with mouth agape, as these million-dollar race vehicles come through sounding like angry animals—simultaneously thankful that I'm not on the course when they pass, and terrified for Cort's impending encounter with the one moment that all motorcycle teams fear in this race.

Why do it? Why ride a motorcycle for nearly 40 hours, on little sleep, through the middle of nowhere in a desert in Mexico? I think back to the 70s, when there were no satellite phones or GPS, no Garmin InReach devices or STELLA race trackers with push-button SOS. There were no pit services to meet you with 110 octane race gas every 60 miles—just getting a friend with some gas to find you in the desert was a struggle back then. There are countless stories from the proto days of the Baja 1000 that truly show what a test of racer and machine this race was. Don't get me wrong—it still is that test. In the 2019 Baja 1000, there was a 47% DNF rate, which our team inevitably contributed to. The race is still nothing to take lightly. The terrain is brutal, the pace is fast—unbelievably fast for the teams at the top, which we privateer teams are nowhere close to. It's common for the biggest names in the sport—previous Baja 1000 and SCORE championship winners—to find themselves on the DNF list.

And, of course, there can be only one winner. The chances that you are part of the extremely elite group of teams that manage to win their class—or overall—in this race? Very low. Go ahead and forget about the possibility of winning. The chances you can manage to outlast the desert; to not have an injury or a catastrophic, race-ending breakdown? That's sounding more achievable. It takes the right prep, planning, team, and willpower to do it—but you can finish.

So then, why? Why go through all of that, to just finish, and not even come close to winning? Or worse yet, to be a DNF statistic?

I'm reminded that George Mallory—who was last seen alive 300 meters from the summit of Everest—famously said he climbed the mountain “because it's there.” I'm certainly not equating racing the Baja 1000 to climbing the tallest mountain in the world, where countless climbers have perished. Nonetheless, when I consider why put the time and energy into finishing this race (and I plan to do it again), that quote always comes to mind.

Cort didn't get run over by the trophy truck pack. After making as much distance as he could, he pulled over and let the high-speed trucks pass him, before heading into the tight sections of Matomi Wash.

Cort did, however, hit a toaster-sized rock at high speed, at race mile 579, as far as one can get into the remote and infamous Matomi Wash. The rock hit the swing arm and ripped the chain

guide off, bending the rear steel sprocket in an entire inch, rendering the bike unrideable. In a test of our team's fortitude and calm under duress, we worked for hours to retrieve Cort, in the middle of the night, 24 hours into the race. Mike volunteered to ride a pre-runner in with no headlight (helmet light only), while dodging high speed race traffic coming up behind him. We patiently sat in a chase rig on the side of highway 5, south of San Felipe, listening to the VHF radio for updates from SCORE's central comms dispatch, dubbed "Weatherman". While we napped and ate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches from midnight to 5am, Cort hunkered down in Matomi and used his desert survival skills, draining race gas from the bike's tank to ignite some dry cactus. He camped out next to his meagre fire and a space blanket, while trophy trucks and class 1 buggies passed all night, until Mike found him, and they headed out together to highway 5 at race mile 600. Ironically, we were about 25 miles as the crow flies from the 2019 DNF site. The fear of going home with a giant L once again loomed large over our heads.

Around 5am we saw two bikes emerge from the sandy Matomi Wash exit, through SCORE checkpoint 3. Mike and Cort pulled up. I gave Kirk's foot a shake to wake him from his brief rest in the van, and he got to work transplanting the swing arm from a pre-runner 450x to the race bike. Kirk sat in the dirt on a tarp next to the racecourse, six feet from the roar of unruly race vehicles, as the sun came up on the Sea of Cortez. A pit crew member from another team (whose race vehicle status was unknown at the time, possibly broken down somewhere on the course) held a giant flashlight behind Kirk to help illuminate the work area. This is the kind of spirit that is common in Baja—spectators and race teams unite to help one another, without anyone needing to ask or instruct. By 6am, our race bike was again functioning, and I finished a cup of coffee and a sandwich and prepared myself for 100 northbound miles of notoriously brutal San Felipe washes, g-outs, and punishing whoops.

We were back in the game, albeit the last bike in our class, trailing behind the slowest motorcycle teams in the race. We had lost eight or so hours at this point—but we definitely were not about to DNF.

There is peace that comes with the chaos. We're all familiar with the drone, the static, the constant hiss in the background of everything we do. Many of us find it harder and harder to truly clear our heads amongst the noise and pestilence of life: current events, the sound of your inbox notifications, text messages, phone calls, life obligations. Yoga, meditation, headspace iPhone apps, drugs, diet, exercise, therapy—these things often provide some means to manage the forces that are running constant interference in our quest to be present.

But the chaos of racing the Baja 1000 is true peace, true presence. Somehow, it melts reality, for 40 hours, and the entire world becomes this one thing. Who cares about your desk job, your resolutions, the latest TV show, that overdue keynote presentation? **This** is the moment. This is the Baja 1000, and Baja wants nothing more than to destroy you and send you home dejected. Come together as a team, push through the blockades, overcome the desert. The ding of your phone will be there when you return, but in this moment, you are alive and fighting through the chaos to maybe—*just maybe*—cross the finish line.

We lost the rear wheel bearing around race mile 740—it might have been related to the grit and dirt present in the work area for the swing arm swap. We again lost a few hours while our chase rig drove across highway 3 to deliver the spare rear wheel to the race bike at *Laguna Salada*; from there Mike headed on across the mountains to race mile 820. Thirty-five hours into the race, I once again got on the bike at 820 to continue on to the finish line.

At this point, we faced a new enemy: time. Our breakdowns and repairs meant we were knocking on the door of exceeding the 40-hour limit to finish. Somehow—despite mental, physical, and psychological exhaustion—I remained in the zone and held my pace through the gorgeous farmland south of Ojos Negros. Baja made one final effort to send us home: the race bike fuel tank was on fumes a mere 15 miles from the finish, after Baja Pits closed up shop in Ojos Negros before I was able to get gas. I stopped and asked spectators for fuel a few times before encountering SCORE's operations station in the Ojos Negros wine country. I bummed some gas from Weatherman's generator crew and pushed on to the finish.

Early in the race, we hubristically thought we might see the podium, as we ran 3rd in class. We did not podium. In fact, the finish line was desolate and slowly packing up when I rolled across the line. My chase team was battling Ensenada traffic to try to see me cross but didn't make it in time. Instead, I gave a post-race interview by myself, thanked my team and our few humble sponsors, and rolled the race bike toward the parking lot. We finished dead last in our class, and overall: the 99th vehicle out of 99 finishers.

But we finished.

Colton, Dave, Kirk, and I shared a bottle of cheap champagne as we loaded up the race bike. We smiled big, high fived, laughed, and passed around the finisher medal—that's right: in this race, you receive a trophy for showing up at the finish line. We fought hard for that piece of cast and painted metal on a nylon strap, nothing has ever felt so hard earned or as rewarding as that finisher medal.

And maybe, nothing ever will—unless we go do it again.